

**Regional Order in East Asia:  
Competitive and Cooperative Dynamics and the  
Role of ASEAN**

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## **Abstract**

One of the key questions that will define whether the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be an “Asian Century” is the region’s capability to develop a regional order that accommodates the competitive dynamics between its major powers, thus allowing regional stabilization and the projection of East Asia’s influence at a global scale.

In this article, we identify two possibilities for the future regional order. On the one hand, it might evolve into a classic balance of power system. On the other hand, it might evolve into a regionalization process, which tries to integrate the region’s powers into a scheme of cooperation.

At the centre of this regional dialectic is ASEAN, which tries to affirm itself as the space of gathering of these two tendencies and to promote a synthesis between them, creating a regional order that integrates regional competitive dynamics by intensifying the cooperative relations between East Asia’s States.

## ▪ Introduction

The major growth in the last decade of East Asian economies, that some have classified as nothing short of ‘miraculous’ (World Bank, 1993), has compelled several authors to argue that the current century shall be characterized by Asian predominance in world affairs. According to authors such as David Dollar (2007), the increasing share of the world economy that is centred on East Asian trade and financial exchange translates itself into a progressive increase in the influence of Asian countries in the configuration and evolution of international affairs, thus ending the centuries old European predominance. Other authors, such as Jeffery Sachs (2004) and Kishore Mahbubani (2008) go even further and manifest the opinion that the growth of East Asia’s importance in the international system corresponds to a progressive erosion of European influence and power (this thesis was particularly popular in the context of the ‘Asian Values’ discourse, (Robinson 1996; Barry 1998)). They expect that the current century will be characterized by the predominance of East Asian countries, societies and values at an international level, thus giving origin to what can be termed as a ‘new Asian century’.

The focus of this article is not so much about whether or not an Asian century will become a reality, but about the prerequisites that East Asia needs to fulfil to be able to project its influence on a global scale, in order to bring about the Asian century. If we look at the history of international relations we shall observe that one of the main preconditions for a specific region to be able to have a global influence is the existence of an established and consolidated regional order. Only with a regional order that is able to regulate and accommodate the competitive/cooperative relations between its fundamental political and economic units, will it be possible to avoid, or at least diminish, conflicts between those units, thus allowing the promotion of regional development and the projection of influence outside regional borders.

Traditionally, there are two main kinds of regional order, hegemony and balance of power. However, never has a hegemonic regional order been able to project influence at a global scale. Such a phenomenon has only been witnessed under a regional order characterized by a balance of power system. It was thanks to the development of a regional order based on the balance of power, that the Europeans were able, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and with particular success during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to regulate their inter-

competitive relations in a manner that, by allowing the overall stabilization of Europe, permitted them to project their influence to the world beyond.

The consequence of a regional order based on a balance of power system is that the region tends to be dominated by a competitive scheme of relations, which determines that the projection of its influence outside regional borders is mainly configured by relations of power and competition between its major States. The period of European predominance on world affairs meant a century of colonialism, imperial competition, and international conflict in the areas of the globe outside Europe.

21<sup>st</sup> century Asia presents certain characteristics of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Mainly, the dominant realistic behaviour that some of its powers, like China, assume in international relations. So, some authors such as Paul Dibb (2005) argue that the regional order necessary for the projection of Asian global influence will assume a form similar to the European balance of power system.

However, since the end of the Second World War, an alternative kind of regional order has evolved, first in Europe and progressively emulated in other regions. This order, which is frequently called regionalism, is based not so much in the regulation and accommodation of competitive power relations, but instead in the promotion of interdependence and cooperation in areas of common interest and shared values amongst regional States. In theory, the predominance of this kind of regional order will promote the projection, to the international plane, of cooperative rather than competitive relations, based on mutual and shared interests instead than on raw competition for power.

Once again, East Asia shows signs of the emergence of this kind of regional order. On one hand, because its States demonstrate increasing economic interdependence through closer commercial ties and exchanges and a proliferation of regional free trade agreements (FTA's). On the other hand, because transnational issues that affect all States in the region, such as economic and financial crisis, environmental disasters, pandemics, piracy, terrorism and State failure compel them to cooperate ever more closely with one another. In fact, the region has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of regional forums to discuss these issues and in which regional powers can cooperate and coordinate policies on matters of common concern.

Although East Asia demonstrates the possibility of developing into either of these regional orders, the fact is that, at the present moment, there is no consolidated and defined order in the region. In our opinion, the development of a regional order is a

prerequisite that East Asia needs to fulfil before it can actually materialize the reality of an Asian century. Furthermore, it is also our argument that the particular configuration that such an order will assume, will determine the nature of the Asian century, and with it, of the international system of the future. That is, whether it will be a regional order based on regionalism, and thus inclusive, dedicated to the pacific and cooperative development and prosperity of the region, and to the promotion of those values in the international system. Or whether it will be a competitive regional order, based on balance of power and competition between its major States for spheres of influence, with the potential for conflict that it entails, for both the region and the world.

At the centre of this dialectic between the two possible futures of East Asia is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an international organization that tries to affirm itself as the space of gathering of these two tendencies, and tries to promote a synthesis between them, thus creating a regional order that integrates the competitive tendencies of the region's States by intensifying the cooperative relations between them.

In the rest of our article we will analyse the possibility for both kinds of regional order in East Asia and evaluate the effects of the materialization of either of them for the region and the world. We will then evaluate the vital role of ASEAN in the future of the regional architecture, trying to understand why is ASEAN in the position to play such a role and what kind of influence it might have in the future of the regional order in East Asia.

#### ▪ **Balance of Power and Containment in East Asia**

Analysis of the international relations in East Asia frequently adopt a realist perspective of the evolution of regional order and demonstrate themselves highly sceptical of the possibility of the development of a regional order based on cooperation in areas of shared interest. According to authors that adopt this approach, “although financial cooperation across East Asia is unprecedented, it is (...) currently more a matter of symbolism than of substance” (Ravenhill, 2008, p.22). The reality, they argue, is that underneath all the discourse about regionalism and shared interests and values, East Asia continues to be a region affected by serious rivalry between its major powers, and by suspicion between its different political units about their respective intentions and ambitions towards each other and the region.

The adepts of a realist perspective are also of the opinion that the so called 'East Asian Regionalism', centred on the several forums that have been created in the last few years, suffers from a major flaw in terms of its efficacy. Since it has ASEAN and the 'ASEAN way' as its major driving force and *modus operandi*, it means that these initiatives, just like ASEAN, "encourage talk-shops, lowest common denominator agreements, while making defection and cheating costless because there are no sanctions" (Kong and Nesadurai, 2006, p.80).

So, from a realist perspective, all of the apparent signs pointing to a greater regionalization and socialization of East Asia are being read with too much optimism and outright naivety. According to these authors, the involvement of China in regional ASEAN promoted forums such as ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asian Summit (EAS) doesn't represent a progressive socialization of China and a transformation of its interests, making it a status-quo power bent on a peaceful rise. In fact, they argue, the Chinese discourse about peaceful rise and the importance of regional cooperation represents nothing more than "external security calculations, [that are] symptomatic of an emerging grand strategy, the key aim of which is to diminish the prospect of its ascent being hindered by other powers in a multipolar strategic environment" (Tan, 2008; Swaine and Tellis, 2000; Goldstein, 2005).

A further argument frequently given is the nature of the relationship between China and Japan. Despite the significant increase in the interdependence and complementarity of Japanese and Chinese economies since the normalization of relations in 1972, the fact is that tensions, suspicion and containment continue to define the interactions between the two countries. The main lines of contention are well known and have been the object of frequent analysis. Issues such as the territorial claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the content of the Japanese and Chinese history books, and the frequent visits of Japan's Prime-Ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine add up to the tensions derived from China's rise as a major regional power and the expressed wish of Japan to become a 'normal country' with full-fledged military capabilities.

That being so, China and Japan are faced with mutual fear. On the Japanese side, fear that China becomes a regional hegemonic power and tries to dominate the region and subordinate the other regional powers to its will, emulating the relations of subordination and tribute that characterized the ancient Asian regional order centred on the Chinese Middle Empire. On the Chinese side, the fear that Japan's re-militarization has as its objective the containment of China, and that it might constitute a prelude to a

return to Japanese militaristic attitude which cost so much to China during the course of the Second World War.

So, according to realists, the closer economic ties between China and Japan aren't that significant and don't represent a major transformation of the relations between the two countries. In fact, the repeated visits of Japan's Prime-Minister Koizumi to the Yasukuni shrine, despite the official and popular protests from the Chinese, demonstrate just that.

The suspicion towards China comes not only from Japan but also from ASEAN and its member-states. Although the organization has promoted several initiatives in order to engage China, several "ASEAN nations have beefed up their defence forces and strengthened their existing security arrangements or entered into new arrangements: the Philippines and Singapore with the United States, Indonesia with Australia (before the East Timor crisis), and Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam with India" (Naidu, 2000, p.5). Once again, this demonstrates that East Asian relations aren't that amiable, and that underneath all the talk about shared interests and the constitution of an Asian Community, calculations of power still matter, and the region's States define their foreign policies around strategies of containment and balance of power.

A further point worth mentioning is the attitude of the United States of America (U.S.) towards the region and, in particular, towards China's rise. Several signs point to a U.S. double strategy relating to China. On the one hand, increased engagement, greater economic ties and cooperation in areas of common interest and, on the other hand, a reinforcement of security ties with the region in order to contain a potentially hegemonic China. From a realist perspective, since China's discourse on its 'peaceful rise' and cooperative predisposition is mainly a diplomatic play to outmanoeuvre potential containment of its regional affirmation, sooner or later, the U.S. main strategy will be one of containment of China, through the reinforcement of its military presence in the region and its security links with the other regional powers, namely Japan.

A realist approach to international relations considers that they are defined by inalterable truths that determine they will always be based on calculations of power and zero sum competition for influence and access to the instruments and resources of survival. East Asia is no different, in fact, it is even more so, because there is no discernable regional order and were it not for the United States security umbrella, the region would find itself in a state of pure anarchy and frequent conflict between its main powers. Furthermore, the increase in the power of China will certainly constitute a

threat to the region's status-quo, compromising the U.S.'s security predominance which as maintained regional peace.

According to this perspective, the regional order will inevitably evolve to a balance of power system, as the U.S., Japan and the other regional States try to contain China's new power and guarantee that it doesn't become hegemonic and a menace to their independence and survival. China will try to escape this containment and balance out the U.S.-Japan alliance both through the projection of its regional influence on the ASEAN countries (reinforcing the relations with Southeast Asian countries, increasing its soft power in the region through military and economic assistance, and incrementing its participation in ASEAN-promoted regional institutions) and through the projection of its influence on a global scale (mainly in South America and Africa, where it will compete with the U.S. for greater influence and access to resources in those regions).

A balance of power based East Asian regional order will have several consequences for the region and the world. The region will become increasingly characterised by relations of suspicion and mutual threat, the defence spending amongst regional powers will increase significantly, there will be a predominant sense of latent bellicosity and the regional institutions promoted by ASEAN will become just another element in the balance of power system, serving as a forum for the mutual supervision of its members and as a mask of cooperation to cover what will be predominantly competitive relations.

Although a balance of power system might guarantee peace and stability in the region, such an outcome isn't necessarily determined since East Asia is afflicted by several flashpoints (such as the Korea's and Taiwan issues and various territorial disputes) which might flare conflicts amongst regional States. So, it will be a balance of power system particularly difficult to manage.

To the world, the consequence of a balance of power regional order in East Asia is the increase in the competition and power politics between China and the U.S., as China tries to escape its regional containment by the global projection of its influence. This means that any Asian Century that might eventually materialize as a result of this regional order, will be characterised by an increase in the levels of competitiveness and great power politics at a global scale.



## ▪ Regionalism in East Asia

In opposition to the realist approach to East Asian affairs, we can instead adopt a perspective that combines the teachings of both the liberal institutionalism and constructivism schools of international relations. According to this perspective the realist interpretation of East Asia as a region marked exclusively by calculations of power and competitive relations amongst its constituent members is being increasingly challenged by the proliferation of regional institutions of cooperation and by deeper economic integration. As examples of these changes one can point to the several FTA's currently functioning (such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement (JSEPA), Singapore-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement) or under negotiation (East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA), ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) or ASEAN-Japan Closer Economic Partnership (JACEP)) as well as to the several regional institutions of cooperation and coordination of policies in subjects ranging from economic and scientific cooperation to discussions about regional security (such as Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), East Asian Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or ASEAN + 3).

All of these regional bodies have had at the centre of their creation the efforts developed by ASEAN. ASEAN is trying to reproduce at a regional East Asian level what it believes to have accomplished at a sub-regional level in Southeast Asia amongst its members. That is, to create a specific framework of regional institutions able to regulate regional competition by the promotion of cooperation around issues of common concern and interest.

One of ASEAN's greatest achievements was its capability to integrate the rise of Indonesia to the status of Southeast Asia's major regional power while avoiding both the outbreak of violent conflict between Indonesia and the other regional powers, and the development of a classic balance of power system to contain Indonesia. ASEAN was able to promote Indonesia's "willingness to collaborate with its neighbours, at the expense of its own regional aspirations (...). In return, Indonesia received recognition from fellow ASEAN members of its *primus inter pares* status within the association" (Tan, 2009, p.174).

ASEAN's success in maintaining peace in Southeast Asia is attributed to the specific character of its regionalization process, which is generally referred to as the 'ASEAN-way'. It basically consists in a set of principles that establish the necessity, within ASEAN's framework, to: respect the independence, sovereignty, equality,

territorial integrity and national identity of all of its members; to the non-interference in the internal affairs of its members; to respect each member's right to lead its national existence free from external intervention, subversion and coercion; and to decision-making based on consultations and consensus (Acharya, 1997). This strong emphasis in the respect for sovereignty, non-interference and consultation/consensus based decision-making gives a specific character to ASEAN's soft-regionalism which allows it to be differentiated from other regional experiences, such as the European Union (EU).

ASEAN's argument is that, in a region affected by such diversity and with so many States particularly aware of their sovereignty and fearful of external intervention in their internal affairs, the 'ASEAN-way' is the only way to move towards regional integration in a step by step process. ASEAN also shares the constructivist's belief that the promotion of interaction and cooperation amongst regional powers will eventually produce behavioural changes, since it has the "capacity to transform [their] reality by changing their views of the material and social world and their identities" (Adler and Barnett, 1998, pp.43-44). It is this behavioural transformation, away from realist behaviour, based on calculations and balance of power, towards a more cooperative one, based on shared interests and identities, that ASEAN believes to have accomplished in Southeast Asia, and now tries to reproduce at an East Asian level.

Essential to this transformation of regional order towards a regionalized future and away from a balance of power arrangement is the regional integration of China and, in the process, the alleviation of China, Japan and U.S. tensions. Getting "the People's Republic in from the revolutionary cold and into the regional fold (...) has long been ASEAN's regional 'game plan'. The strategy (...) has essentially involved extending the ASEAN model of regional security – the ASEAN *modus operandi* of soft regionalism and process-driven institutionalism – to the wider Asia-Pacific region" (Tan, 2009, p.167).

To achieve its objectives, ASEAN tries to foment what has been classified as *complex engagement* with China and the other regional powers. That is, to "promote a multiplicity of interaction – economic, political and social; informal and formal; bilateral and multilateral – on a variety of issues" (Ba, 2006, p.158). Through this bilateral and multilateral engagement, ASEAN tries to "not only create a constraining web of interdependence but also to persuade China [and the other regional powers] to think differently and less confrontationally about regional security" (Ba, 2006, p.158).

So far, ASEAN's efforts have materialized in several important regional events that, according to some observers, seem to point towards a greater degree of regional integration. On top of all the regional free trade agreements previously mentioned, East Asian States now cooperate and consult each other on a variety of subjects ranging from trade and investment, development assistance and energy security, to environmental preservation, disaster prevention, food security and health care (Ken, 2006, p.5).

Furthermore, the ASEAN promoted regional structures seem not only to have been able to engage Asian States in cooperative and consultative relationships with each other, but also to have actively produced a change in their attitude towards regional integration and engagement. Particularly expressive of this transformation is China's attitude towards regional institutions. China, "which had long been reluctant and passive to any multilateral cooperative frameworks, began to take active initiatives to cultivate its relationship with ASEAN countries" (Ken, 2006, p.9). In 2003, China signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, in 2004 a new bilateral dispute resolution mechanism was created, in 2005 was initiated a process of cooperation in disaster planning and relief operations and in 2010 the new ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement came into effect. Japan's reaction to this was the proposal for the creation of the ASEAN-Japan Closer Economic Partnership and of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA) which, if realized, will deepen even more regional integration and interdependence.

If successful, ASEAN's project for regional integration will have significant consequences for both the region and the world. At a regional level, one could expect to see a progressive increase in cooperation and integration, accompanied by deeper levels of engagement and trust amongst its States. The deeper the integration amongst the region's States, the greater the socialization process they are exposed to will influence their identities, values and overall interests, thus opening the way for even more cooperation. Eventually, it might be possible to evolve from functional cooperation, based on shared utilitarian interests, to higher kinds of cooperation, based on shared values, identities and regional projects. This will open the way to an East Asian Community. Throughout this process we can expect a progressive decrease in regional tensions and suspicions and the creation of a regional order that is inclusive, dedicated to the prosperity and the pacific and cooperative development of the region.

To the world, the development of regionalism in East Asia can have several consequences. One can consider that it might originate a regional economic bloc with

exclusivist tendencies which competes, on an economic level, with other regional blocs such as NAFTA and the EU, thus contributing to a greater fragmentation of world order and a deceleration of globalization. However, we are more inclined to expect it to be a source of stabilization to international affairs since it will advance the pacification and development of one of the main regions of the international system and, in all likelihood, promote those same values to the rest of the world.

The real test to ASEAN promoted East Asian regionalism will come from its actual ability to fundamentally reconfigure prevalent identities, perceptions and behaviours amongst the region's major powers, mainly China and Japan. Despite the significant advances in regional integration witnessed in the last few years, the fact is that realist arguments still find echo in the region, and although there is a greater degree of interdependence and cooperation amongst regional powers than ever before, the years-old suspicions and tensions still exist.

Thus, the future evolution of regional order isn't clear. If it either evolves towards a balance of power arrangement or a deeper form of regionalism ultimately depends on the present day behaviour and choices of its constituent States and organizations. At the centre of this dialectic between the two regional futures is ASEAN, actively seeking to make its regional vision a reality.

#### ▪ **The Way Forward: ASEAN and the Future of Regional Order**

ASEAN plays a vital role in the future of East Asia's regional order. Currently, as we have seen, it is at the centre of all the major initiatives that promote regional integration. However, ASEAN must recognize that this condition isn't immutable. As such, it needs to reinforce its ability to maintain itself as a meaningful actor in the region, in order to materialize its vision for the future of regional order.

One of the main ways to guarantee the perpetuation of ASEAN's regional influence is making sure that it "avoids choosing between aligning itself with one major regional power or another. (...) [Instead] it should aim to emerge as a 'soft power' in the region, whose norms, values and institutions are admired as being acceptable and indeed something of a model for the region" (Tay, 2006, p.126).

ASEAN's soft power can be increased by reinforcing the strategy so far followed, through the promotion of even greater functional cooperation around issues of common concern for regional powers. As Hitoshi Tanaka (2005) observes, East Asia is not yet ready for the formation of a regional community based on shared values.

However, a kind of functional community might be achieved through functional cooperation in non-traditional security fields such as failed States, counter-terrorism, piracy, energy, environment, infectious diseases and drug trafficking. Such cooperation can be very productive both for trust building and for the practical benefits it generates, and can actually constitute a roadmap for community building in East Asia (Akiko, 2006, p.71).

According to this constructivist perspective, it is plausible to expect that “if East Asia develops a sense of regional partnership through functional cooperation, the region will eventually express a common political will” (Akiko, 2006, p.84). Functional cooperation can contribute for the progressive building of trust amongst East Asian States and to the overall stabilization and pacification of the region. This will open the way for the creation of a regional order that will not only allow peace and prosperity but also the projection of East Asia’s influence on a global scale. For example, “against a backdrop of soaring energy prices and increased demand, East Asia may have more opportunities to influence global energy policy by acting as a region” (Akiko, 2006, p.84).

While “we may wish for a rapprochement between China and Japan, this cannot be commanded and there are few signs of a resolution at hand. Without this, [and without the existence of shared values or a common regional identity,] East Asians must be prepared to be patient and work for the long term, through a series of patchwork and more limited cooperative schemes, rather than expecting a clear regional vision to be announced and agreed shortly. Therefore, for the near to middle term, East Asia will be more a framework of cooperation and understanding, rather than a ‘community’” (Tay, 2006, p.11).

So far, ASEAN seems to be on the right track. Several initiatives of functional cooperation are already underway and being projected to the regional level through bodies such as ARF, ASEAN+3 and the East Asian Summit. Just to mention a few areas of cooperation, we can give the examples of transnational crime; defence; law; energy; food; agriculture; forestry; finance; investment; minerals; transports; telecommunications; disaster management; environment and health, as well as the several bilateral FTA’s previously mentioned.

However, this great proliferation of cooperative initiatives is starting to cause several problems. Firstly, the absence of a common regional institutional framework originates a significant lack of integration and coordination between these different

initiatives. For example, the various bilateral FTA's in the region, because they lack any coordination or integration amongst them, have given origin to the so called 'Spaguetti Bowl Effect'. This effect consists in the existence of agreements which overlap and contradict one another, thus raising the costs of economic transactions in the region and producing an effect contrary to their original objective, which was to enhance the competitiveness of their contracting parties.

Secondly, the greater complexity involved in the management of these cooperation initiatives obliges ASEAN to reinforce its institutional architecture. Furthermore, ASEAN will also need to reinforce its institutions if it wants to maintain its regional influence and continue to be considered a model for regional integration. Otherwise, it runs the risk of losing its importance by being considered nothing more than a talk shop, unable to materialize its declarations of intention.

The way forward towards the realization of ASEAN's vision for the region seems to ultimately depend on its ability to reinforce its regional influence and to further integrate the main regional powers, into schemes of cooperation that are able to build trust among them and fundamentally alter both their calculations of national interest and how they pursue it. In our opinion, this goal can only be achieved through the simultaneous fulfilment of three main requirements. ASEAN has to be able to: a) reinforce functional cooperation at a regional level, b) strengthen its institutional architecture, and c) promote the convergence of regional cooperative initiatives.

Thus far, ASEAN seems to be pushing the region in the right direction. Regional functional cooperation is greater than at any previous time in history thanks to the efforts of ASEAN and the ASEAN promoted institutions'; the approval of the ASEAN Charter and the establishment of the ASEAN Community are good pronouncements of the evolution of the organization in what concerns its internal cohesion and regional influence; and the proposals of the East Asia Free Trade Area and of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia, both with ASEAN's backing, seem to point to greater coherence in regional cooperation.

However, much is still needed in order to achieve ASEAN's vision of a cooperative regional order in East Asia. Despite all the mentioned developments, the fact is that the region is still affected by tensions between its States, who continue to base their regional foreign policies mainly on calculations of power and zero-sum competition for their national interests. Thus, to realize its goal, ASEAN needs to pursue further advances in these three main areas.

Firstly, it needs to reinforce regional functional cooperation in areas of shared interest and common concern. The present state of international affairs, with the significant systemic impact of globalization, presents the perfect opportunity to do it. As State frontiers become increasingly irrelevant to contain the proliferation of asymmetrical threats such as piracy, pandemics, and transnational crime, the stage is set for the establishment and deepening of regional arrangements of cooperation to tackle both these issues and the phenomenon of failed States, from where the majority of these problems emanate. ASEAN needs to seize this opportunity to further promote and advance regional cooperation on functional issues, mainly through forums such as ASEAN+3, ARF and EAS.

Secondly, ASEAN needs to reinforce its institutional architecture. Although the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Community were important steps in the right direction, they weren't enough to significantly transform the perception of several observers who consider that ASEAN and the ASEAN promoted institutions are nothing more than talk shops with little practical results (Wanandi, 2007). ASEAN needs to further augment the integration amongst its member States and the importance of its internal institutions. This means, namely, to enhance the importance and clarity of its enforcement and dispute resolution mechanisms and to clarify the rules of its decision making. ASEAN's credibility as a leader and a source of models for regional integration will ultimately depend on the success of its internal institutional framework and on its ability to prove to other regional powers, by its own sub regional example, both the feasibility and the benefits derived from the creation of a regional order based on cooperation and integration.

Finally, ASEAN needs to promote the convergence of the region's several cooperation initiatives into a single framework. In the short term period this is the least pressing matter, however, in the medium term, the proliferation of overlapping and contradictory cooperation activities and FTA's might prove troublesome. So far, we consider there are at least two proposals for such a framework that could constitute an option, respectively, the East Asia Free Trade Area and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (Nanto, 2010, pp.16-18). ASEAN has to decide which one to support based on the kind of regional order it wants to help construct.

If it supports the East Asia Free Trade Area, proposed by ASEAN+3, it will be easier to count on the support of China. However, it might also mean that in the context of such a small group of States, China will have a greater capacity to impose its will on

others and to shape the evolution of the institution as a whole. On the other hand, if ASEAN supports the Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia, proposed by the East Asian Summit, it will be harder to count on China's support. However, the greater number of States involved in such a framework will prevent China from becoming predominant and will increase the necessity for negotiation and cooperation on a wider regional scale.

## **Conclusion**

The possibility of an Asian Century ultimately depends on East Asia's ability to develop a regional order that allows it to stabilize the relations amongst its States and project its influence to the wider international system. However, the future of East Asia's regional order is uncertain and is presently at a crossroads.

Two contradictory models compete amongst themselves for the configuration of the region. On the hand, a balance of power system, characterized by relations of containment and zero-sum competition. On the other hand, a regionalization processes, in which local States try to integrate the region's major powers into a scheme of cooperation. As we have seen, either of these models has divergent implications for the region and the world.

At the centre of this dialectic is ASEAN, clearly trying to push the region for an order based on regionalism, integration and cooperative relations. As we argued during the course of our article, ASEAN's efforts have already produced significant changes in behaviour and attitudes, and contributed to a degree of integration never previously seen in the region. However, much still needs to be made before the development of a truly cooperative and community based regional order can be witness in East Asia.

In order to reach such a goal, we identified three main policies ASEAN should follow, respectively, a) to reinforce functional cooperation at a regional level, b) to strengthen its institutional architecture, and c) to promote the convergence of regional cooperative initiatives.

The realization of ASEAN's vision, if even possible, will take time and require an intense socialization process. In the meanwhile, East Asia will continue to persist in its sort of undefined regional order, somewhere between containment and cooperation, between balance of power and a cooperative regional order. To materialize an Asian Century, East Asia will have to choose which of these tendencies to follow and



consolidate. This decision will ultimately depend on East Asia's vision of itself and of its place in the world.

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